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# Water as a matter for human emotions

Ho-Jeong Jeong

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**Rochester Institute of Technology**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**Water as Metaphor for Human Emotions**

**by**

**Ho-Jeong Jeong**

**Date : October 1997**



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## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the plastic image of water as the metaphor for specific human emotions. Given its fluid nature, water itself does not have its own particular form of existence. However, influenced by the external environment, water creates various forms that suggest specific human emotion. These forms are created by forces of nature. I intend to create sculpture of the motion of water that evokes human emotion. The format for the idea is sculpture that consists of structural, repetitive and organized modules.

I exploit the repetitive and sequential use of forms that provide an immediate feeling of visual unity.

In this thesis I will discuss how my sculptural work explores water as a metaphor for human emotion.

## II. KOREAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

Since I began work on ceramic sculptures at RIT, I have questioned my intent for creating sculpture. Why did I choose water as an aesthetic object in creating sculpture and where does it stem from? It has always been difficult to explain why I have been so fascinated by water regardless of whether it was for oceans, lakes, rivers or streams. At first, I just liked the various forms presented by flowing water and wanted to cultivate my works from them. When I was in Korea, I did not deal with water to create my works, even though I was attracted by the beauty and power of water. I needed to understand what made me employ water for my work now. The answer was that it came from my experiences and memories of Korea.

When I was a child, my family spent every summer on the East Coast of Korea. We frequently vacationed at places where rivers and streams flowed. However, I was not good at swimming, and I was timid, so most of the time I just enjoyed watching the sea and rivers by myself. The East Sea showed me various and beautiful scenes. Water looked very natural and seemed to try to say something to me. In addition, I worshipped water in the same way as most people in Korea do. However, water did not become the theme for my artwork in Korea because I did not realize how much I was inspired by the water at that time. While spending my first year at RIT, I

found the source of inspiration within myself and focused on the development of the forms of water.

There was a deeper connection to water than the memories in Korea and there was also a difference in the perception of water between me and others in the USA. It was not a simple experience that I had for short period of time. I would say that it comes from the differences between the two cultures. My Korean culture has affected me and my sculptures. Cultural heritage unconsciously, but intensely, affects people while they live in a society. Each population accepts it very naturally because they are living and communicating within their own cultural heritage. Therefore, when I discuss my sculptures, my Korean cultural heritage should be taken as a premise.

Korea is a peninsula a thousand miles long. It forms a land bridge between the continent and Japan. In fact, Korea in ancient times was like a relay station, transmitting to Japan the culture of China. The major portion of the country is characterized by hills and mountains with long and navigable rivers. The east coast is a nearly unbroken, precipitous shoreline of cliffs and rocks. Beaches are usually found where streams empty into the sea. The religion of the ancient Koreans was animistic, nature worship. Based on the geographical environment, from ancient times to today's modern society, there are religions based on animistic, nature worship. Although the religions lost their power they were to stay with the Koreans into modern time. They are animism and shamanism. Zo Zayong defines Korean shamanism as "the primitive religion believing in a heavenly spirit,

spirits of sun, moon, stars, earth, mountains, water, rock, tree, ancestor, warriors and ghosts.”<sup>1</sup> To these ancient people the world seemed full of powers, manifesting themselves in animal and vegetable life, in the heavens above, and in the waters below. Therefore, the forces of nature, especially awe-inspiring trees, rocks or mountains and other inexplicable natural phenomena, became objects of worship.

I am not a religious person and even in the past I did not try to have a religion. However, I understand that the tradition of the religions have influenced people’s notions about nature. The tradition is a part of the cultural heritage of the society. Being influenced by cultural heritage, people build up their own experiences of life and express it in different ways. I am one of the Korean people and express my personal experience influenced by Korean cultural heritage, through my works. This cultural context is my starting point. George F. Mclean says, “ The focus is upon the creative capacity of the human spirit; its ability to work as artist, not only in the restricted sense of producing purely aesthetic objects, but in the more involved sense of shaping all dimensions of life, material and spiritual.”<sup>2</sup> This describes the foundation upon which I build to reach the next step in my work.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Portal, “Korean Shaman Paintings”, Oriental Art Vol. 41, (Spring 1995), pp.2-9.

<sup>2</sup> George F. Mclean, Relations between Cultures, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series 1, Vol.4, (Washington :The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy,1991), pp.24.



While trying to articulate my thoughts about my work, I have recognized how deeply Korean cultural heritage was imbedded in myself and my work. Now I work with clay in a different environment and culture. I would say that this became an opportunity to find the Korean cultural heritage within myself while learning about another world. I create ceramic sculptures which stem from my cultural heritage. I believe that water is a reflection of myself, and these sculptures are expressions from the experiences and memories derived from my cultural roots.



### III. HISTORICAL REFERENCE

Historically, water has captured the attention of many philosophers, painters, photographers, poets and musicians. It is amazing that a simple thing like falling or flowing water can evoke such a variety of emotional responses. In order to understand the use of water in art, we need to know how the liquid acts and reacts with our senses. Most of all, we should perceive how its symbolism relates to us as human beings. Water is composed of stories beyond its molecular fusion of hydrogen and oxygen. Our relationships with water today have been shaped by our ancestors. The passing of centuries has added to the symbolism, and the collective wisdom has survived the millennia.

Along with earth, air, and fire, water has been regarded as one of the basic elements of the universe. Chemically, it is an oxide of hydrogen that covers about two-thirds of the earth's surface. The properties of water, as it appears in nature, are inviolable, and its complex physical behavior can not be completely explained by a simple equation. When water moves, its dynamics are controlled by complex displacements, energies and the interaction of forces. Sprays, rapids, drops, plops and deluges are all kinetic performances. In a liquid condition, water may move within itself. It may lie still, flow, fall down or spout up.

Even though chemistry and physics dictate the motion of it, water is shaped by the environment which is the stage for profound interpretation and inspiration for artists. Ripples in ponds expand endlessly from a plunk of a stone. Rivers flow through deep valleys carved out by their waves or rapids, and the ocean's horizon is viewed as an infinite line, while waves roll in through the years, decades, and centuries. In nature, water is shown in many beautiful scenes, but it can be shown in dreadful scenes of floods and tidal waves. Generally, it gives us peace to see water flowing slowly in a small stream, but water flowing roughly along a precipitous cliff or making huge waves in the ocean arouses fear. Water has two different meanings. Because of this paradoxical character, water embraces various metaphors.

Under medieval law, it was forbidden to supply banished criminals with water, since water was essential for survival. More than anything else water is a source of life and the great symbol for life. All life depends on water; nothing escapes its influence, and nothing lives without it. This life-giving water appears over and over through religions, literature and art in every culture. The father of Taoism, Lao-Tzu wrote, "The highest form of goodness is like water. Water knows how to benefit all things without striving with them. Therefore, it comes near the Tao."<sup>3</sup> Water is perhaps the most outstanding among Lao-Tzu's symbols for the Tao. The emphasis of the symbolism is ethical rather than religious or literal. In China where the

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<sup>3</sup> Lao Tzu, "Tao The Ching", trans. Dr. John C.H. Wu, (New York: St. John's University Press, 1961), pp.11

earth has commonly been viewed as a living organism, water is cherished as a manifestation of the Tao that points to the path of natural order. Chinese painters often included water in their landscapes as a sign of life.

A shaman's ritual that was performed in Korea used bowls full of water, rice, beans or some other items. In this ritual, water represented one of the gods in their beliefs. On a night with a full moon, Korean women prayed for good luck and safety for their families in front of a bowl of clean water. Water was also seen as a gift from heaven in many old Korean paintings. The two *Screen of Five Peaks* of the Choson Dynasty (figure 1, 2) were such paintings. Besides the natural appearance of water, the five peaks also represent the five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. These five elements are protective gifts from heaven.

In his *Essay on Landscape Painting*, Kuo-hsi wrote, "Water is a living thing: hence its aspect may be deep and serene, gentle and smooth; it may be vast and ocean-like, winding and circling. It may be oily and shining, may spout like a fountain, shooting and splashing; it may flow afar. It may form waterfalls rising up against the sky or dashing down to the deep earth; it may delight the fishermen, making the trees and grass joyful; it may be charming in the company of mist and clouds or gleam radiantly, reflecting the sunlight in the valley. Such are the living aspects of water."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kuo-hsi, *An Essay on Landscape Painting*, trans. Shio Sakanishi, (London:John Murray, 1959), pp.47-48

Water as a sign of life appears in the western culture as well. Water is the central source of an ideal landscape. Abundant water is a symbol of fertility. In the *Golden Bough*, the English scholar Sir James Frazer described several rituals that emphasized the connection between water and the fertility of the earth.<sup>5</sup> When water is pure and clear, it can also indicate chastity. Linked to water's role as a symbol of chastity is its power as a cleansing agent. Physical purification leads to spiritual rejuvenation is the lesson of the water metaphor. In the Christian tradition, water signals the introduction into spiritual life and the promise of eternal salvation. At the height of religious festivals in India, thousands of people flock to the Ganges river for ritual immersion. Despite the fact that the river is usually brown and muddy, its purifying power never diminishes.

On the other hand, water has also been seen as a symbol of death. Until modern times, water was feared as an evil force. As complex and vital as it can be, it can also be empty, dark, and cold. Water relentlessly dissolves bonds, spoils, drowns, wears away, rots and floods. Throughout his life, Leonardo da Vinci was obsessed with the movement of water. Leonardo, himself, witnessed devastating floods in Florence in his youth, and in his notes spoke of its potential for destruction. In his notebooks, he wrote, "Among irremediable and destructive terrors, the inundations caused by rivers in flood should certainly be set before every other dreadful and

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<sup>5</sup> Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), pp. 62



terrifying movement, nor is it, as some have thought, surpassed by destruction by fire.”<sup>6</sup> After watching rivers swallow up countryside and towns, he described the water as “the abominable and awful evils.”<sup>7</sup> His descriptions of how to depict a deluge are no less than the nightmare scenes he drew. His drawings of *Deluge* (Figure 3) and tempests are patterns of passionate swirls. Dark and foreboding, evoking the fears that rushing waters elicit, the drawings are paradoxically seductive in their uncontrolled movement.

In his many paintings which describe scenes of the sea (Figure 4), J.M. William Turner expressed his experience of the grandeur and terror of the sea. He repeatedly painted scenes of toil and danger in the daily lives of fishermen. It was about the overwhelming and disintegrating forces of water.

As keen observers of the world, artists throughout history have sought metaphors in water to help define human existence. Throughout the millennia, observing water in a natural balance has motivated artists to create their works. Water in nature provides us with the essential metaphors for life and an understanding of our existence. The metaphors of water are indeed numerous. They are about life, death, good and evil. Both sides of the metaphors of water may be easily recognizable because water exhibits its

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<sup>6</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. Edward MacCurdy, (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1938), pp.645

<sup>7</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, pp.645

character through physical states, and influences everyone. Most people, sometime, feel a sense of awe at the sight and sound of water. However, water also means a gentle lapping and patting, and this is an aspect which is as valid, and as expressible as the more vigorous moods. These rich and powerful metaphors of water inspired me to explore the movement of water as my vehicle for expression.

#### IV. EVOLUTION

I have dealt with movement of water since my first year at RIT. At the beginning, I only imagined beautiful and peaceful motions of water, and tried to depict the feeling in my work. When I finished my first sculpture of moving water titled, *Wave-a* (Figure 5), I was satisfied for a moment because I thought that the sculpture was presenting the beauty and peace of moving water and because it seemed to comfort me. However, the viewers' general impressions were that the piece looked cold and stylized. I admitted that the slip-casting method I employed for the work was partially responsible for the coldness. I totally agreed with the viewers' impressions, and this made me struggle to find the right direction.

For the next work(Figure 6), I employed the hand-building method and tried to create a huge and powerful wave rolling in and crashing. The reason that I decided to make a huge wave was that I wanted to express, through my next pieces, a feeling of moving water which was less sterile than the first work.

The various metaphors and forms of moving water that we see evidenced in nature remind me of a harrowing personal experience. When I was a high school student, I went to the East Sea with my family. We took a fishing boat far out to sea. Suddenly, the weather changed, and we could

see a thunderstorm coming closer to our boat. The sea, which had been moving gently, started to rage and the waves became violent. We were afraid, as the boat was being shaken violently by the terrifying force of moving water. At that time, I felt like such an insignificant being in the face of the overwhelming power of nature and feared the moving water. The action of the water I saw was anger itself.

In ancient Korea, there were several rituals related to the angry sea. People who lived in a coastal area thought that the reason the sea became high and threatening was that it was angry. They needed to appease the anger of the sea by performing a ritual. I remember both the personal experience and the tradition, so I tried to elicit the fear through my work. However, my second attempt was a failure because it was not powerful enough to convey the fear to myself and other viewers.

While creating the second work, I found myself comparing water to a human being. In nature, the movements of water react to each other. They are influenced by the environment, like human emotions change in our diversified society. I believe moving water provides us with a pertinent metaphor for human emotions. Thus, I began to think about what could evoke emotion in my work. Except for the condition of absentmindedness, people express emotions relative to their bitter, pleasant, sad, terrible, or happy life experiences. In order to describe the emotion and lead the viewers to feel the emotion through my works, I needed to integrate the right form, surface and color of moving water which represented specific and powerful



emotions. The emotions, in extreme, consist of two feelings: one was bright, playful and happy, and the other was powerful and fearful.

After a period of struggle, I created another sculpture of moving water(Figure 7) representing these emotions. Even though I did not find the right forms and surfaces until the early fall of my second year, the effort to reach my goal and each work I made seemed to tell me both what the next step would be, and what I lacked. In the development of my works, the most difficult challenge was how to invoke the fearful feeling with my work.

At that time, Rick Hirsch, my Chief Advisor, suggested that I look at the paintings of Hokusai, a Japanese painter. Among his paintings, I was especially interested in *Great Wave off Kanagawa*(Figure 8), one of the series, "The Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji." In an extreme way, this painting demonstrates his awareness of the mighty forces at work within the natural world. Even Mt. Fuji looks fragile and seems about to be engulfed. I took note of the powerful force of the wave, and it had an immense impact on me. Observing this painting helped me to define what was lacking in my former pieces. To convey the threatening and powerful feeling of the moving water, I had to demonstrate the great powers which engulfed human beings, which was drove and broke human beings, and which made human beings themselves like leaves thrown about at the mercy of a wave.

## V. DESCRIPTION

For my thesis show, I created two sculptures representing moving water as metaphor for human emotion. Each sculpture evokes its own specific human emotion. Their contrasting movement and color is used to emphasize the emotion each sculpture describes. In particular, the colors of the glazes are deliberately chosen to maximize this contrast.

*Flowing* (Figure 9) attempts to depict the peaceful and pleasant emotion of the movement of water flowing in a river or stream. Following the path of least resistance, it hits water-worn rocks, spouts up, falls down and lies still. The work, additionally, represents playful action with the movement of short curves or waves. This sculpture consists of five individual pieces, each chipped and chiseled in the front or the end. The pieces vary in size, but the entire work is eighteen inches tall, seventy inches wide and forty inches deep. The pieces flow in the same direction, but show different actions in their movements. Some of them gradually level off, breaking up into enlarging circular and elliptical shapes, and making a quantity of foam. Some of the pieces are rolling in, rising up, sliding and spouting upward. The glazed surface of the slightly rising and rolling parts are smooth. Contrasting, are the parts of bursting foam, which have a rough texture. For the surface, I manipulated the clay in a variety of ways, creating

a rough texture. I used several kinds of paddles and wood chisels. When water is flowing, the surface and color vary with the environment. The color can be notably changed by the reflection of the light from sun and the angle of the viewers. For this sculpture, I thought that it was more important to use colors which effectively addressed the emotions, rather than the blues or greens considered as the usual colors of water. I chose a white glaze which represented a brighter and more peaceful feeling, but then decided to use several white glazes to extend the variable surface of moving water. I tested many kinds of white glazes and chose five differing ones for each piece. All can be classified as white, but they are variations of cold, warm, creamy and bluish whites. The surfaces of the glazes also differ from each other. Some are shiny, while some are satin or matte. The staggered arrangement makes and preserves the continuation of varied movement. These movements relate the pieces to each other and make a continuous succession with cumulative power.

*Wave* (Figure 10) is the biggest and heaviest ceramic sculpture I have ever made. This sculpture reflects the emotions of anger and fear in a huge, powerful wave. Most important, was determining the scale which would elicit the most fearful feeling and powerful movement from the sculpture. Discussing it in class, I decided upon the scale of the sculpture and made several small scale models to convince myself of what I was going to make before working with the actual piece. The height had to be at least greater than my own height to elicit fear of the wave. Thus, I tried to make the

piece as big as I could. The sculpture is twenty-eight inches tall, eighty-nine inches wide and thirty-three inches deep. Alone, it did not reach the height suggested in class discussion, so I employed a gray pedestal to create a height that makes viewers look up.

The work is made of three modular pieces. To make this sculpture, I utilized the hand-building method. It was built in one whole piece at first. After forming the this big piece, I cut it into three modular pieces with wire. Then, I used slabs to fill in the side facets of the modular pieces. On the sculpture, a black satin glaze was used to imply strong power, fear, dread and even evil. The actual feeling of the black glaze is close to dark gray. The glazed surface is very smooth and has a hint of shine. Unexpectedly, one of the pieces was over-fired, so the black glaze flowed to the bottom of the piece, which added a little change in the black glaze. However, I found that the over-fired surface was more effective in describing the surface and movement of water. Therefore, I over-fired the other two pieces to achieve the same effect.

For the arrangement of *Wave*, I staggered the pieces in order. The first modular piece is two inches forward of the second piece, and the second piece is two inches forward of the third piece. This represents the sequence of the water's movement, step by step, and emphasizes the strong power of the wave with sharp edges showing between each modular piece.

For my thesis show, I deliberately installed these two sculptures, *Flowing* and *Wave*, in contrast to each other. By using background panels, I

almost completely isolated my sculptures from others' work, not only to prevent an overlapping effect but also to enhance the contrast between *Flowing* and *Wave*. In a rectangular space, the two sculptures were placed in opposing corners, and there was a walking space between them so that the viewers could stand between and be exposed to two different emotions surging toward them. Interacting in one space, the two sculptures complimented each other, reinforcing the emotions of weakness and of strength, serenity and anger, pleasure and fear.





Figure 1. Screen of the Five Peaks, ink and color on silk, National Museum of Palace Relics, Seoul , Korea.

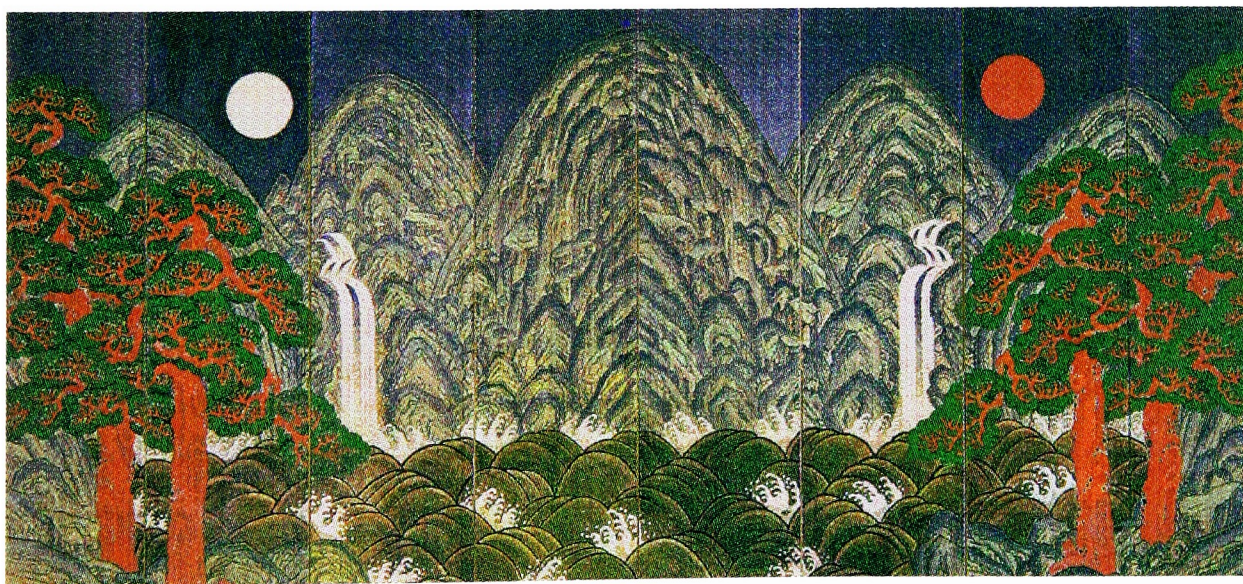


Figure 2. Screen of the Peaks, ink and color on paper, Hoam Art Museum, Yongin, Korea.



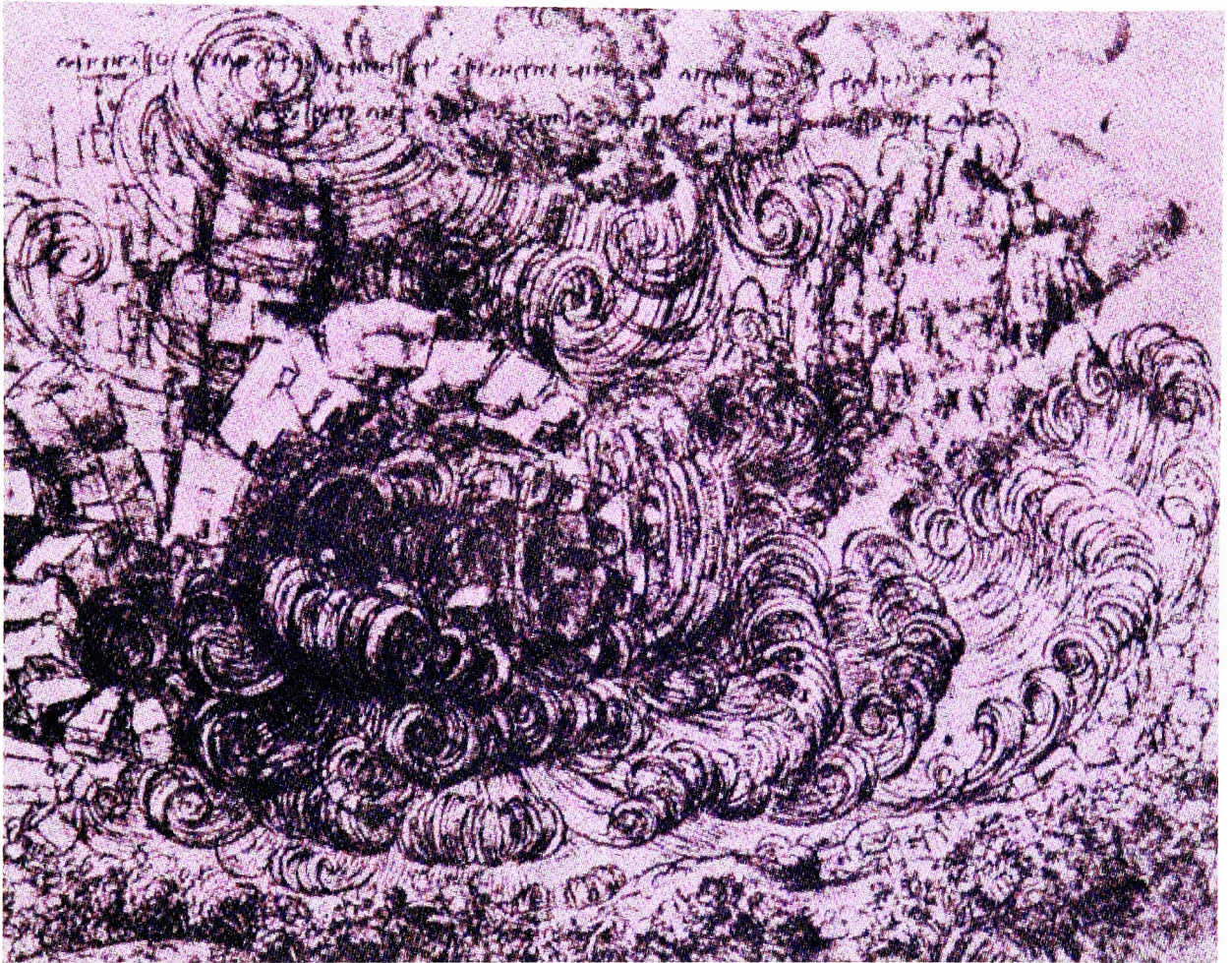


Figure 3. Leonardo Da Vinci, A Deluge, (c. 1515), Black chalk, pen and ink, Windsor, Royal Library.





Figure 4. J. M. William Turner, Fishermen at Sea, 1796, Tate Gallery.



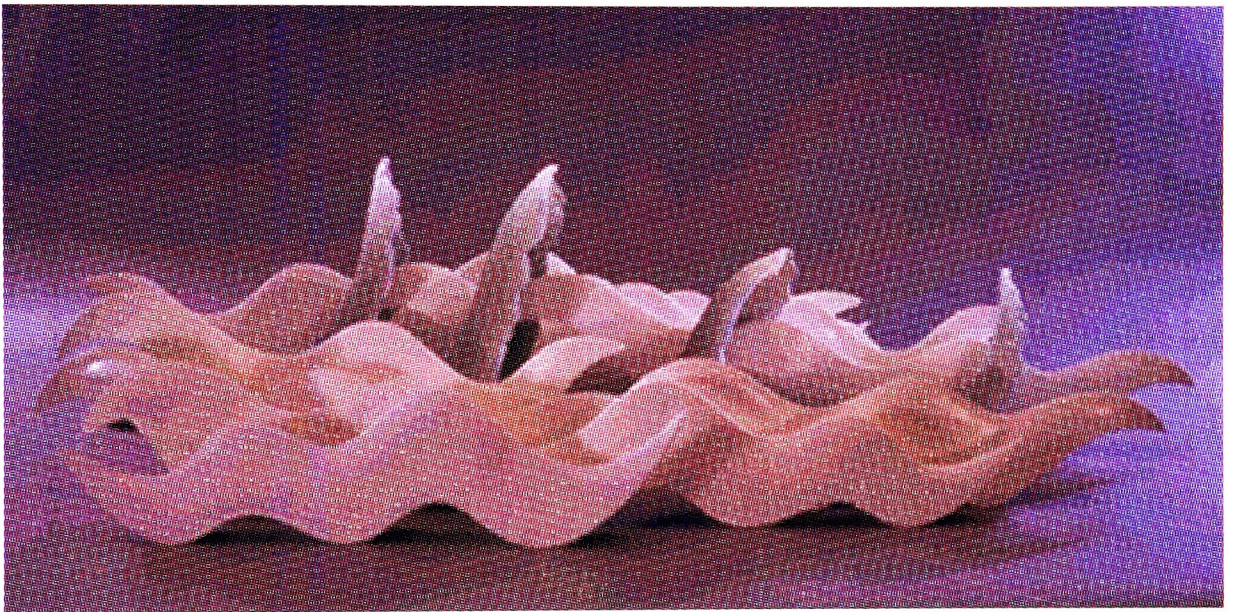


Figure 5. Wave-a, h24" x w74" x d33", 1995.

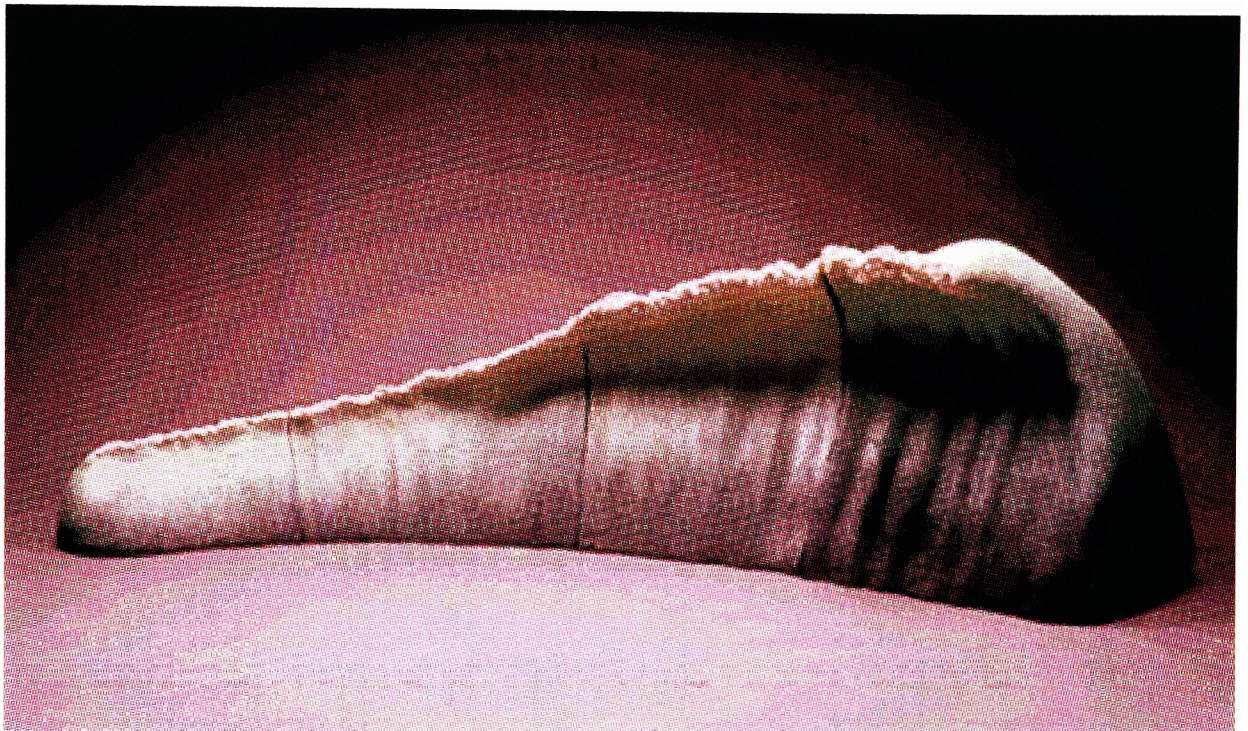


Figure 6. Wave-b, h32" x w67" x d25", 1996.



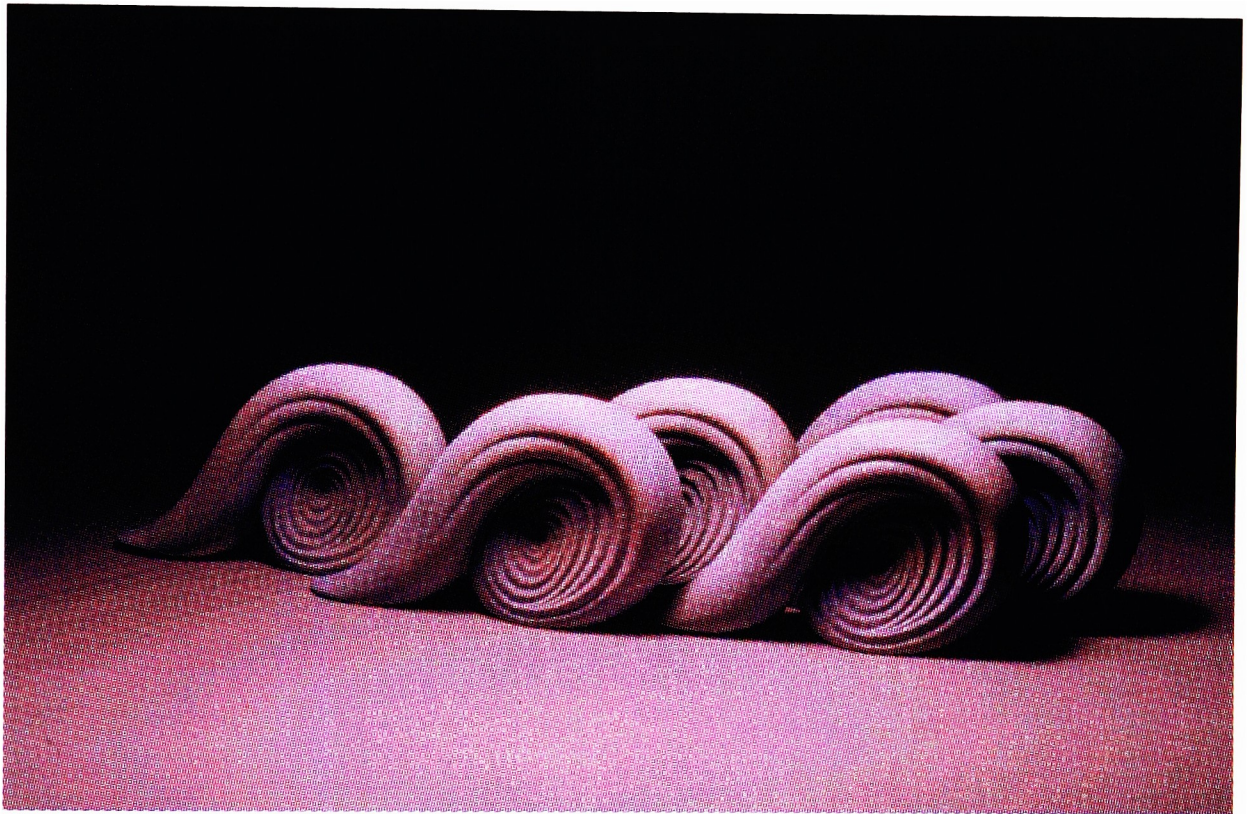


Figure 7. Flowing-a, h19"x w51"x d30", 1996.

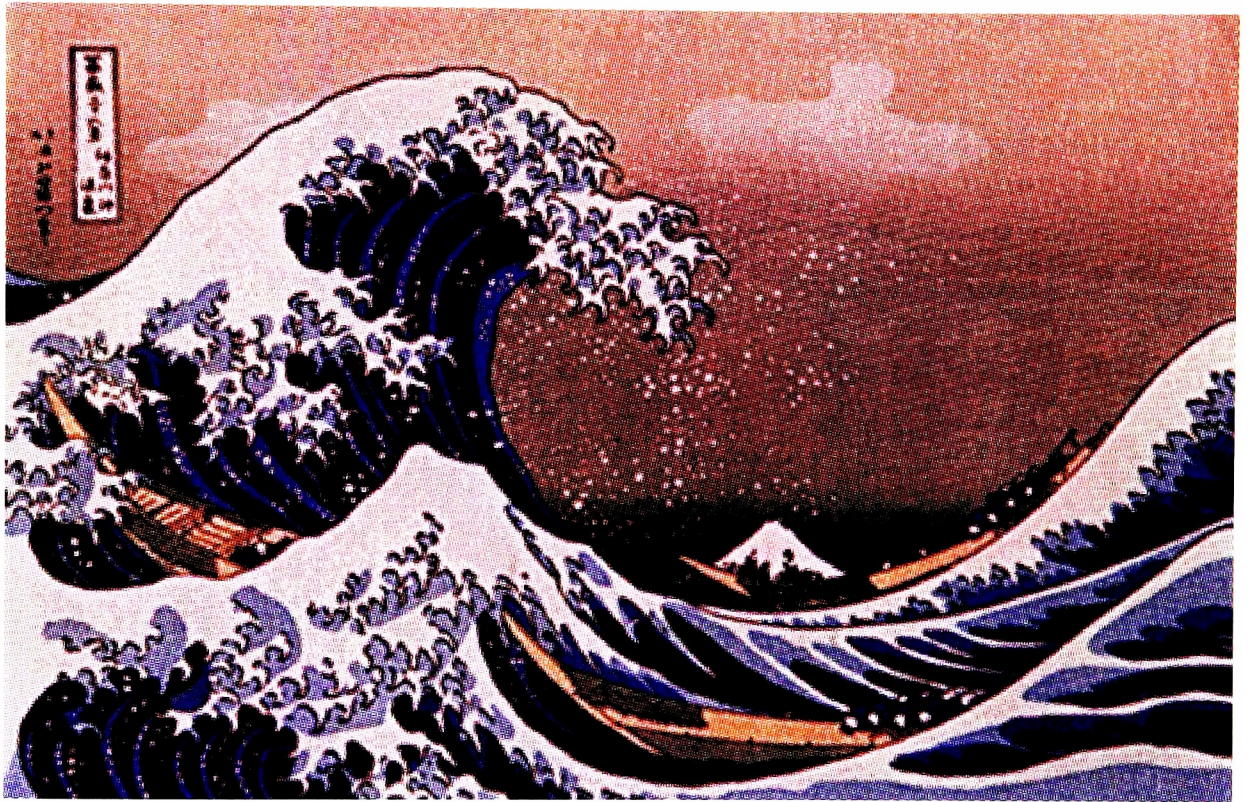


Figure 8. Hokusai, Great Wave off Kanagawa, Japan



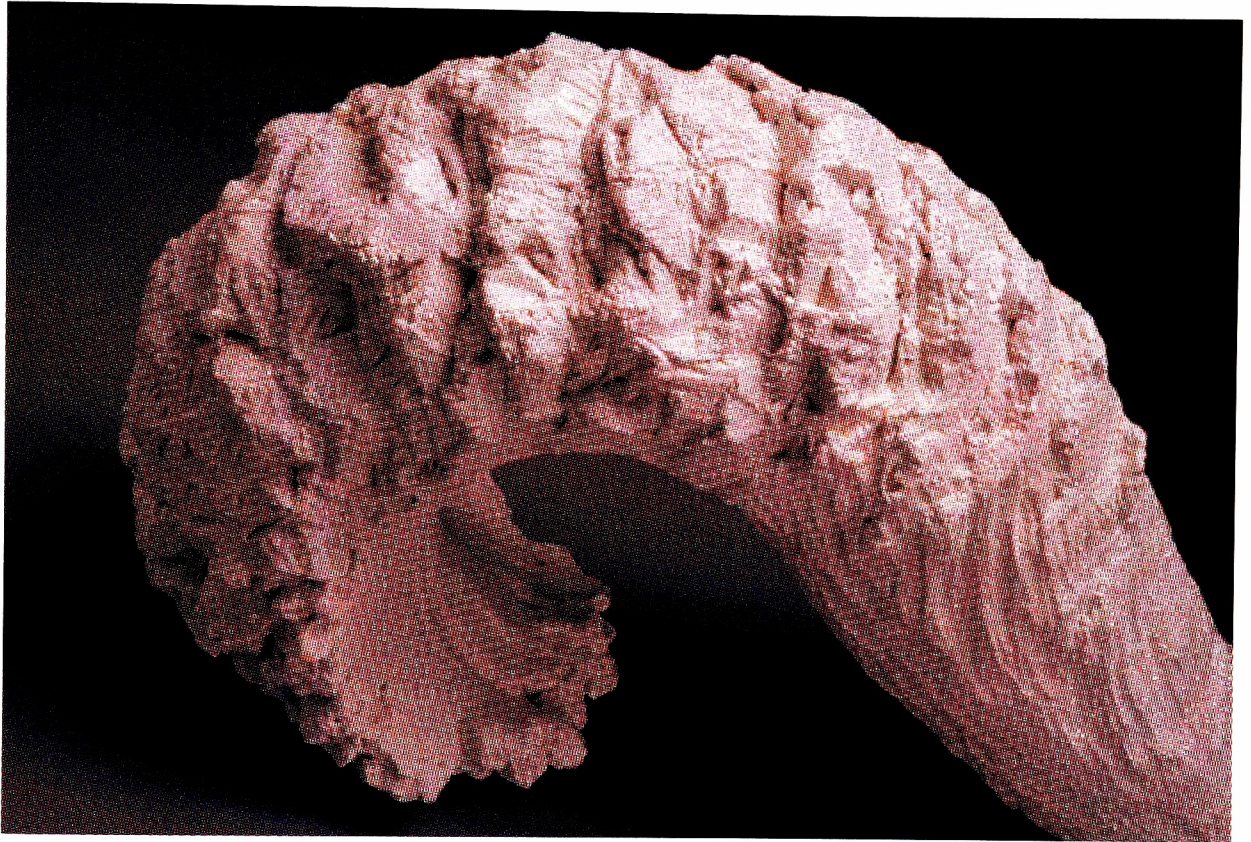


Figure 9. Flowing, h18" x w70" x d40", 1997



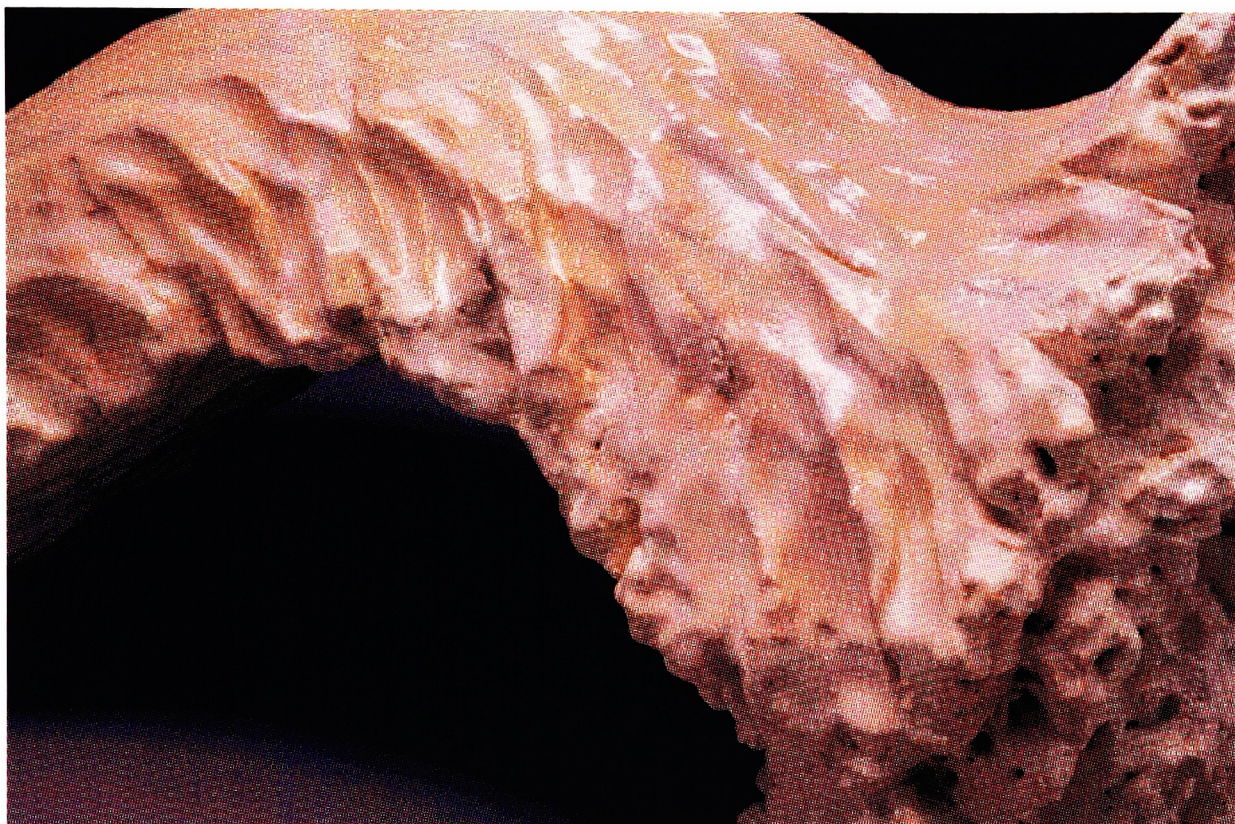
Detail: Flowing





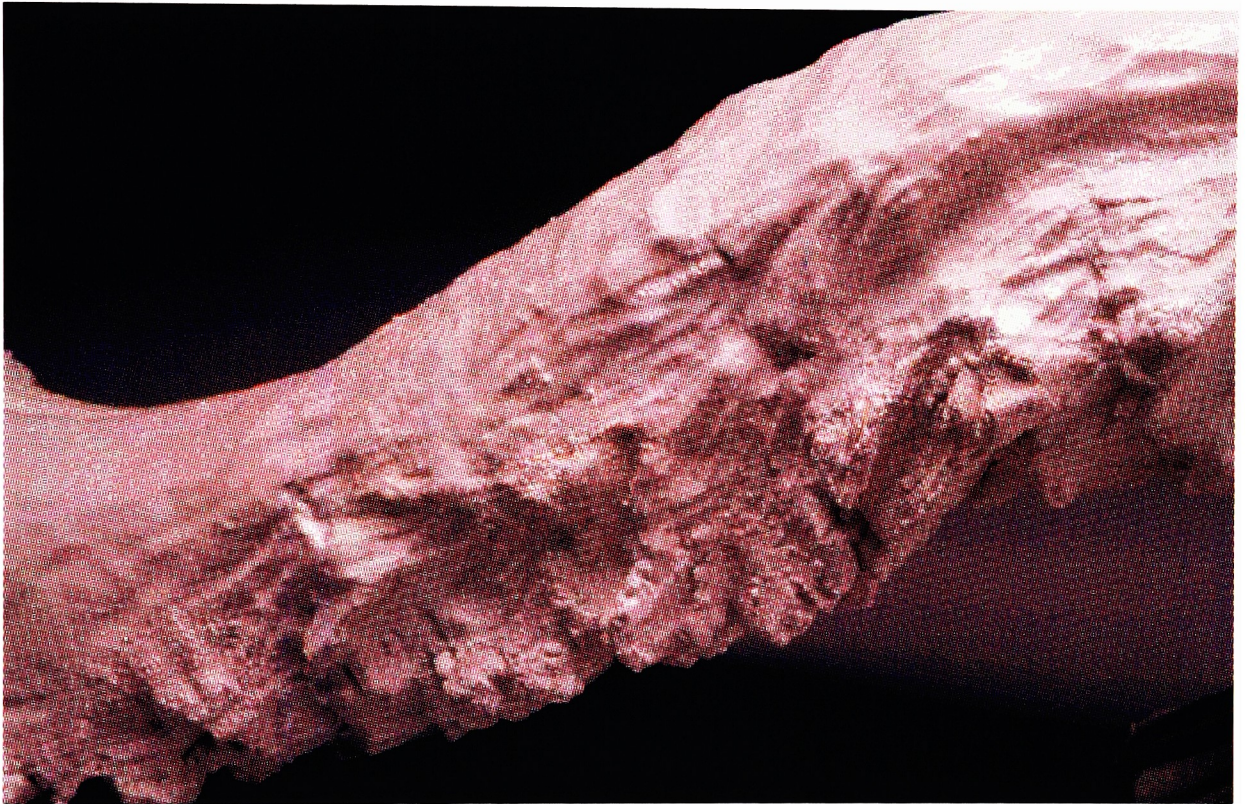
Detail: Flowing





Detail: Flowing





Detail: Flowing



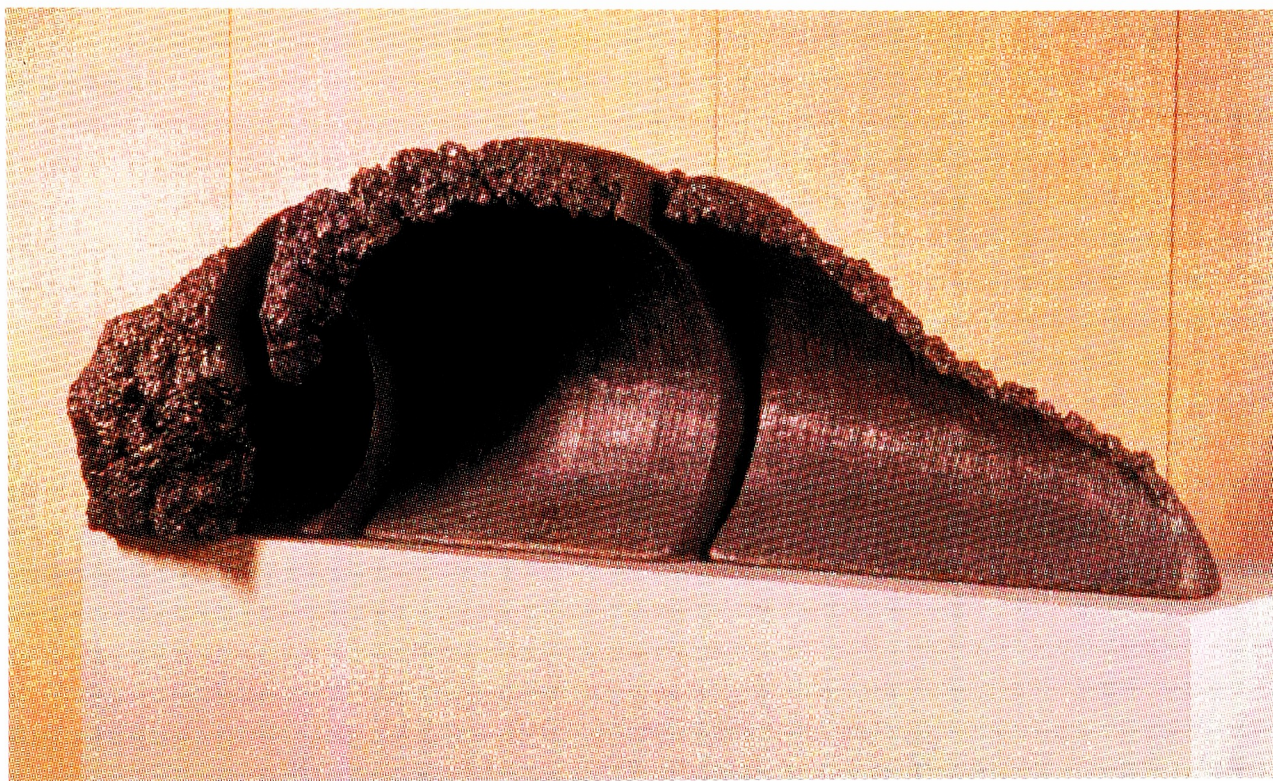
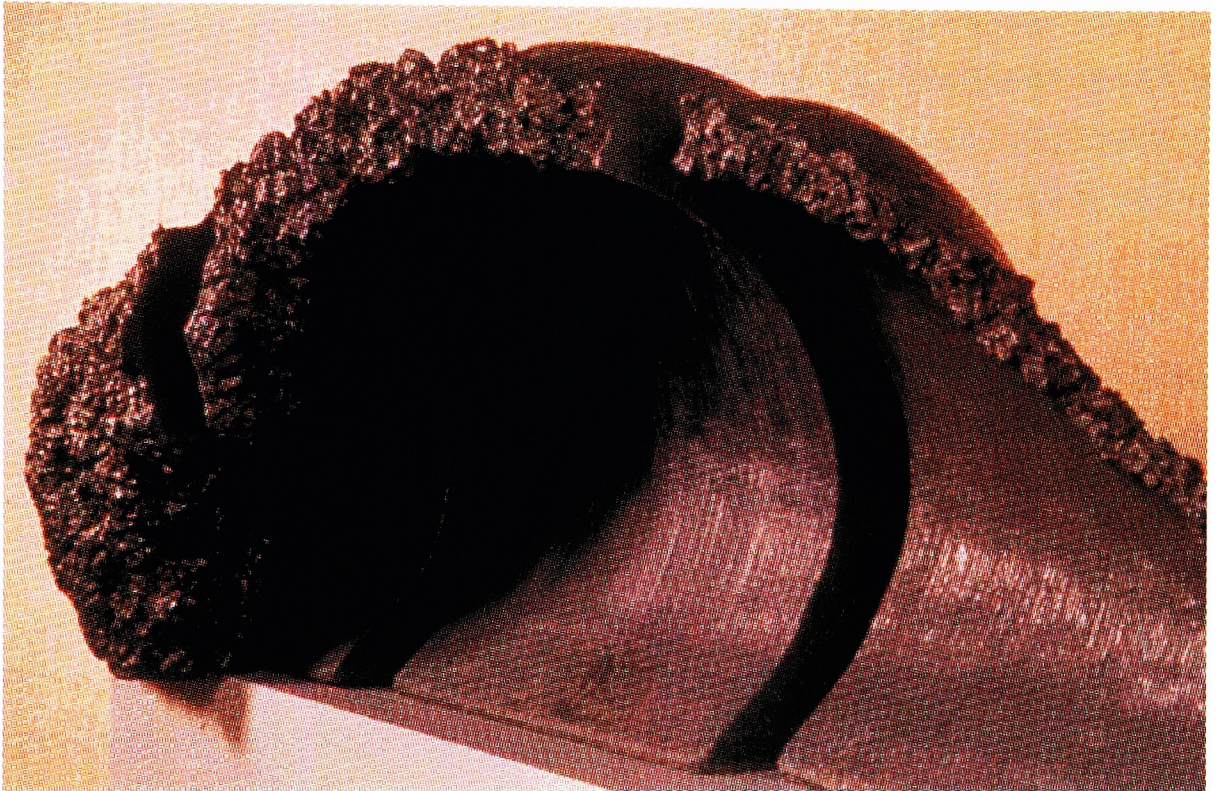
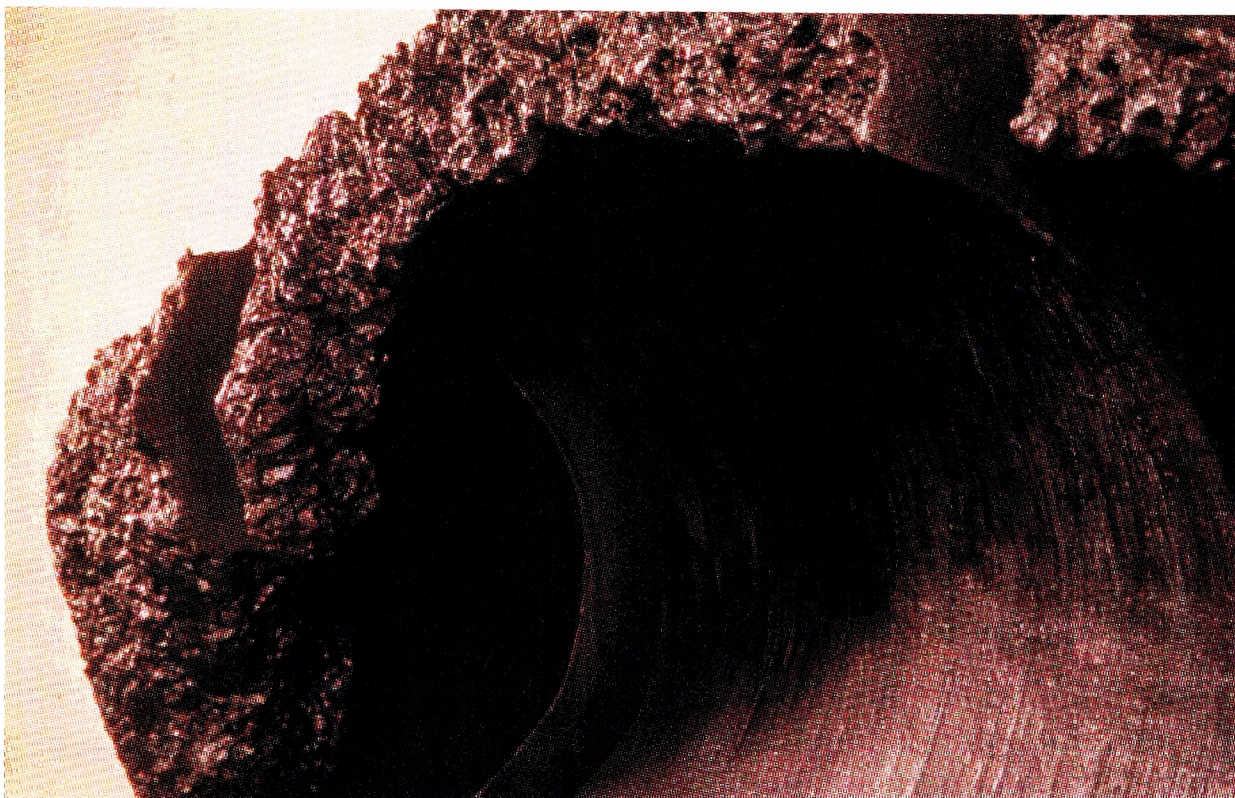


Figure 10. Wave, h28' x w89" x d31", 1997





Detail: Wave



Detail: Wave



## VI. CONCLUSION

Sharing a feeling through art work is one of the joys common to artists. Another joy for me is to encourage other people to look more closely, and to make their own interpretations. Just like little children, by keeping their eyes open to works, viewers start out by seeing, then feeling. Making sculpture is the best way that I have found to get close to myself and be faithful to my own emotions. I feel that I have successfully developed my pieces and achieved what I intended for this thesis.

For the development of this thesis, I have striven to solve the problems which critiques often brought up regarding my sculptures. The pieces were not clearly reflecting the movement of water and were not properly representing emotion through the use of glaze and scale. It was difficult for me, as a foreigner from another culture, to make a sculpture expressing feelings that everyone can share. In working with clay I drew upon the experience I had had in my country and my thoughts of my new culture and then came to see how I could communicate through the pieces. I listened, felt, and accepted words and ideas from others who had had differing experiences so that I could achieve my goal of developing my work step by step.

Having chosen moving water as a subject for my sculpture, I became even more fond of it. I have observed how water behaves under varying conditions, and have studied the forms and actions of water.

There have been difficult times for me, but I feel it was worth all of the effort involved to be able to create such fine sculpture. Becoming acquainted with these manifestations of one of nature's most dramatic elements was the most fascinating adventure in making these sculptures. In future works, I will continue to deepen this research and develop more diverse and expansive approaches.



## VII. TECHNICAL INFORMATION

### White Sculpture Body Cone 04

Hawthorne Fire Clay	65
Om#4 Ball Clay	10
Tile#6	10
Wollastonite	10
Talc	5
Spar	5
Fine Grog	10
Medium Grog	5
Coarse Grog	10

### Orange Sculpture Body Cone 04

Hawthorne Fire Clay	39
Red Art	6
Om#4 Ball Clay	10
Wollastonite	10
Fine Grog	10
Medium Grog	5
Coarse Grog	15

### Cloudy Imitation stoneware Glaze Cone 04

Lithium Carbonate	10
Whiting	9
Pemco Frit #626	5.8
Zinc Oxide	9.2
Kaolin	22.3
Silica	42.0
Bentonite	2.0
Add: 1% Tin Oxide	
4% Zircopax	

### white Satin Matt Cone 04

Frit G-24	25
Frit G-23	40
Zircopax	25
EPK	10

Add: 5% Mason Stain  
5% Flint

**White Glaze Cone 04**

Frit 3110	75
China Clay	15
Flint	10

Add: 10% Vanadium Pentoxide

**V.C. Satin Stone Glaze Cone 04**

Frit 3124	45
Gerstley Borate	10
Nepheline Syenite	15
Talc	5
whiting	5
Flint	15
EPK	5

**Duncan Glazes Cone 04**

White Froth	SY549
white Satin	SN352

**Black Oxide Glaze Cone 04**

Nepheline Syenite	24.6
Gerstley Borate	15.2
Barium Carbonate	17.8
Flint	24.6
EPK	8.1
Lithium Carbonate	9.7
Manganese Dioxide	10
Black Copper Oxide	2
Black Iron Oxide	4
Black cobalt Oxide	5

## VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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